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## Morality in Law Enforcement: Chasing “Bad Guys” with the Los Angeles Police Department

Steve Herbert

Police officers regularly construct their work in terms of a morality that is so pronounced that it must arise from unique aspects of their role in society. I draw on fieldwork conducted in a patrol division of the Los Angeles Police Department to develop an explanation for the prevalence of police morality. Three components of the police function create potent dilemmas that their morality helps ameliorate: the contradiction between the police's ostensible aim to prevent crime and their inability to do so; the imperative that they run roughshod over the ambiguity inherent in most situations they handle; and the fact that they invariably act against at least one citizen's interest, often with recourse to a coercive force that can maim or kill. Reliance on moralistic understandings for the police's mission provides a salve for these difficulties; however, it can also work to harm police-community relations. Paradoxically, the police's reliance on morality can encourage or condone overly aggressive actions that are, in fact, contradictory to the virtuous self-definition officers often construct.

**L**egality and morality are intimately connected. Most legal rules contain implicit or explicit normative messages; they point to proper behavior that ostensibly best serves social needs. It is not surprising, therefore, that the enforcement of law is often understood by police officers as a moral as well as a legalistic enterprise. As Silver (1967) pointed out, the growth of modern policing developed in tandem with a more pervasive sense of moral order created and protected by the state. Or, as Corrigan and Sayer (1985:4) have argued more generally: “Moral regulation is coextensive with state formation, and state forms are always animated and legitimated by a particular moral ethos.”

The role of the state in creating a moral order, in part through creating a legal order, is a long-standing focus of major social theoretic work, including that of Durkheim (1986), Weber (1954), and Foucault (1990; see also Donzelot 1979; Polsky 1991). These works share an interest in the ways in which power

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marries with morality to imprint itself indelibly on the citizenry. The state's legal order is understood as part of an attempt to create a more peaceable populace that abides by a presumably morally justified set of rules and regulations. Without this sense of moral justification, state power would seem nakedly coercive and thus illegitimate; public assent would wither.

One of the moralistic ways that nation-states acquire public loyalty is through the construction of enemies. In the process of defining inferior others, nation-states simultaneously construct themselves as unique repositories of virtue, and thus compel compliance to their morally laudable aims (see Campbell 1992; Dalby 1990). Boundaries are constructed between pure and polluted (Douglas 1966, 1973), between good and evil, and the favored nation shines in the comparison. Internally, the state's moral aims work toward the construction of the model, normal citizen, who is well schooled, well behaved, and willing to sacrifice for the nation's welfare. This normality is, again, constructed in tandem with a contrasting pathology (Durkheim 1938), and those perceived as incorrigible are sanctioned and/or banished.

State rule thus requires and daily enacts morality, often through the construction and enforcement of its legal structure. It trains attention on those both within and without the state's boundaries, regularly trumpeting virtue by denigrating evil. This is certainly true of police officers, who serve as the state's principal internal cartographers in marking the boundaries between normal and pathological. Officers are preeminently focused on those who violate moral-cum-legal codes, and define their actions as part of an attempt to protect the good through expunging the evil.

A sense of moral fervor clearly attends much police behavior (Reiss & Bordua 1967; Skolnick & Fyfe 1993; Van Maanen 1978; Westley 1970); officers regularly draw on an abiding reservoir of virtue to sustain and justify their actions as part of a vital mission (Reiner 1992). Indeed, this sense of morality seems unusually pronounced in police subculture. This raises two provocative questions: What accounts for the regular and emphatic invocation of moralistic dictums to guide and justify police actions? And what influence does their morality have on police officers' practices?

Previous work on the police, as mentioned, has drawn attention to the extent of police moralism, particularly to the extent that it contributes to the development of an "us versus them" mentality (Niederhoffer 1967; Skolnick 1966; Westley 1970); only police officers, from this perspective, understand their particular mission, and hence they are isolated from the rest of the misguided populace. Van Maanen (1978) also points to one of the key advantages for the police of drawing sharp moral characterizations—it provides ample justification for whatever actions they

choose to take, a point I develop further later in this article. However, none of the works that discuss police morality fully develop an explanation for its pronounced presence in officers' daily lives or fully discuss its implications for daily practice.

I draw below on field observations of officers in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to illustrate the centrality of morality to everyday understandings and justifications of police actions.<sup>1</sup> I follow with a three-pronged explanation of the prevalence of this fervent morality. More specifically, I focus on (1) the contradiction between stated police aims and the near impossibility of achieving those aims; (2) the inherent ambiguity in many situations that officers encounter, which must be ignored if the officers wish to effect speedy resolution; and (3) the inescapable demand that officers act against at least one person's interest in most situations, often with recourse to coercive and, ultimately, lethal force. All these fundamental constituents of the police's daily practice produce tensions, frustrations, and dilemmas that an overarching, trans-situational morality helps to ameliorate.

The final sections of the article consider the consequences of the prevalence of police morality, especially in terms of tensions between officers and minority communities, and also review the paradoxes that are central to that morality. Central here is the fundamental importance of coercive force to the police's function in society (Bittner 1970). On the one hand, the moral code regularly invoked by officers tends to sanitize or divert attention away from the tools of force they often wield. On the other hand, coercive force in a society that values peace is always difficult to justify unambiguously, and thus makes the police's omnipresent moralism ever uneasy.

## I. Morality in Policing

*It is early in the morning, and the attending officers seem a bit listless as the sergeant begins roll-call training. His topic for the day is traffic stops of passenger vans. He reminds the officers that traffic stops should never be considered routine in Los Ange-*

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<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork, in a single patrol division from August 1993 to March 1994, consisted primarily of 35 ride-alongs of an average length of six hours with sergeants, who served as supervisors of patrol officers in the field, and 20 ride-alongs of a average length of four hours with Senior Lead Officers, who are responsible for police-community relations and for monitoring locations of ongoing criminal activity. The ride-alongs stretched across different shifts, although they were primarily concentrated in the evening hours. In addition, I spent four evenings observing dispatch operations in the Communications Division, did single ride-alongs with specialized units focused on narcotics, vice, and street gangs, and rode in Air Support helicopters twice. I carried a small notebook while on the ride-alongs, which I used to jot down brief notations of events and conversations. These were later developed into fieldnotes which served as the data base for the analysis, and the sources of the vignettes described here (Herbert 1996). The vignettes are set off in italic type.

*les, because one could quite likely "have something more" than just a moving violation. He places great emphasis on how to approach a van safely, given its large number of doors and windows. Any of these portals, he cautions, could be conduits for an attack. Thus, officers should approach cautiously and vigilantly. Throughout his monologue, he makes repeated references to the "evil" that stalks the streets of Los Angeles, to the various people "who do not have a life" and therefore might just attack a police officer wantonly. In fact, some people might be heartless enough to indoctrinate young children into attacking the police; presumably this means that officers should not relax even if a van is full of kids.*

The sergeant's goal is to underline tactics to ensure officer safety, but he punctuates his remarks with repeated moralistic invectives against those the officers encounter daily on the streets. The sergeant simultaneously seeks to caution the officers and also to explain just why they need to be careful: there is evil out there, ready to overpower the unsuspecting. Indeed, evil can come disguised as a seemingly wholesome family enjoying a drive in their passenger van.

The discourse of evil is remarkably common in police discourse. The term "bad guy" is ubiquitous in police parlance, occasionally supplemented by such terms as "punk," "idiot," "knucklehead," or "terrorist." Another term commonly used, "predator," is quite evocative in displaying a sense of evil devouring good; like carnivores attacking prey, these dastardly fiends probe for vulnerable spots among the populace and attack for no logical reason. Observations of police in "Union City" provided Van Maanen (1978) insight into the ubiquitous usage of a similar term, "asshole," a category police reserved for any who refused to accede to officer prescriptions. This category, he argues, not only helps to justify a variety of police actions but also to increase an internal sense of police validity.

Recourse to "evil" as an explanation for the seeming chaos that Los Angeles officers encounter on the streets is long-standing. Note the following comments, one from William Parker, chief from 1949 to 1966, the other from one of his successors, Daryl Gates, who served from 1979 to 1992:

There are wicked men with evil hearts who sustain themselves by preying upon society. There are men who lack control over their strong passions, and thus we have vicious assaults, many times amounting to the destruction of the life of a fellow man.

To control and repress these evil forces, police forces have existed, in some form or another, throughout recorded history. (Wilson 1957:5)

Society flinches from the truth; we do our very best to find psychological and sociological reasons to excuse behavior that our

minds won't accept for what it is. You walk into court and you have all these attorneys explaining away all of the things that you can sum up in one simple word: Evil. (Gates 1992:165)<sup>2</sup>

As Douglas (1966) suggests, the construction of morality often rests on such stark distinctions between pure and impure. In this case, the distinction is between good and evil, between those who share a concern for their fellow citizens and those who are fundamentally, irrationally, and irrevocably opposed to common standards of behavior and decency. And it is the police's unique and valorous duty to intercede between these two groups, to protect the one by detecting and banishing the other. It is perhaps easier, from this perspective, to understand officers' regular complaints about a lax judicial system that, in their view, enables evil to seep quickly back out of jail and to repollute otherwise peaceable neighborhoods. The power to banish some to jail allows officers to draw a boundary between pure and polluted and to nourish their morality with a sense of a clear victory over evil. If, however, suspects reappear quickly back onto the streets, the boundary erodes and with it the officers' sense of virtue.

Officers are particularly concerned about those they consider most vulnerable to "predators"—children and the elderly. An officer explains his concern about dice games in a fast-food outlet's parking lot; he wouldn't, he says, want his children to see that. Another officer makes the same complaint about alleged drug sales occurring across the street from an elementary school, and indicates that she will exert pressure on the dealers to convince them to relocate. A third officer keeps a similarly watchful eye on a group of young men who regularly gather in front of the home of an elderly woman. The woman has called the patrol station and complained that she is so afraid of the group that she will not leave her house. Enraged and protective, the officer informs the young men that unless they gather elsewhere, "Somehow, some way, you are going to jail."

Officers, in other words, act not just to enforce legal codes but to buttress wider notions of moral correctness (Banton 1964; Bittner 1967). Thus, the legal action of, say, arresting a spousal abuser is justified not just as a legal proscription but as a morally laudable act.

*The sergeant is one of three officers who arrive simultaneously at a call about an alleged domestic incident. Their knock on the door is answered by the man of the house, who invites them into the living room. There they discover his wife with a fresh bruise above her eye. They also notice that the phone has been pulled from the wall. Their initial questions elicit little re-*

<sup>2</sup> The extent of this moralizing from the leadership suggests that perhaps the LAPD is unique in the extent to which it constructs the world in stark terms. However, as mentioned, police morality has been noted by numerous researchers as a pronounced aspect of the social world of a variety of police departments.



*sponse, so they take the woman into a back bedroom, where she admits that she called the police and that her husband is the author of her injury. The officers inform her that California law requires that her husband be arrested. The woman protests. The sergeant explains that the law provides them no leeway. Further, he says that what her husband has done "simply isn't right" and that his time in jail will enable her "to sleep in peace."*

In this situation, the officers define their legally required act in larger moralistic terms and justify their actions as a prophylactic against unwanted violence that allows a woman to get some restful sleep. The police's sense of moral virtue in protecting good from harm rests most fundamentally in their acceptance of the unfortunate necessity that they may have to pay the "ultimate sacrifice" in enacting their responsibilities.

*A sergeant is responsible for overseeing a "scenario" at a training event. In the scenario, a pair of officers is called to a home. When they arrive, they find a pair of officers, a man and a woman, play-acting a domestic dispute. The dispute quickly escalates when the man pulls a gun and points it at the woman. The officers are thus confronted with an important and sudden decision: whether to shoot the man. The decision is not simple, because the officers may fear the outcome should they not fire accurately. They could inadvertently wound the woman, or if they miss altogether, they could compel the man to shoot them instead. After witnessing several teams handle this scenario, the sergeant discusses the patterns he observed. Most striking to him was the generational difference between older officers, who usually chose to shoot, and younger ones, who typically demurred. He credits the fallout from the Rodney King beating as the key factor; younger officers, he reasons, are socialized into a different ethic that intensifies concern about inappropriate uses of force. For his part, the officer says simply, "I'm the police." It is his final comment.*

The sergeant condenses a powerful sentiment in three simple words. He states, quite flatly, that it is his solemn duty not to fear potential damage to his personal safety or career advancement when a need for potentially lethal force is evident. For him, it is part of his sworn mandate to so endanger himself if the welfare of a tormented citizen is at stake. It is a central component of his virtue as a police officer that he will sustain such risks to protect good from evil.

But note that police morality is not monolithic. It is not necessarily embraced avidly by all officers, and may also be differentially employed across the varied populations of the city. Police officers do characterize various communities and social classes, and their moral characteristics, in markedly different terms (Al-

pert & Dunham 1988; Banton 1964; Bayley & Mendelsohn 1968; Bittner 1967; Brooks 1989; Manning 1993; Sacks 1972; Werthman & Piliavin 1967). Also, the high-minded moralism of an overtly self-sacrificing officer runs counter to another motivation commonly found in police organizations—the desire to lie low and avoid trouble. The “CYA [Cover Your Ass] syndrome” afflicts officers who live primarily in fear of administrative censure and thus avoid all situations that involve risks that might later be second guessed (Brown 1981; Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert 1994; Reuss-Ianni 1983). This syndrome is also regularly displayed around the LAPD, as in other police organizations. If not monolithic, however, police morality is still robust in both its construction and consequences, and thus merits closer attention.

## II. Explaining Police Morality

Police officers, then, regularly nest discussions and justifications of their actions within a discourse of morality that portrays them as proud and noble warriors protecting the peace from the chaotic and turbulent anarchy of evil. Why, however, is such an ardent moralism so prominent in police subculture? The answer, in short, is that the stated aims of police departments are generally unattainable and that police work is inescapably ambiguous and ultimately coercive. These factors lead to tensions and dilemmas that officers can minimize through recourse to an overarching morality that provides a secure and even glorious rationale for their ever disputable and ultimately ineffective actions. Morality, in other words, works as a functional adaptation to the inevitable uncertainties and failures that police officers daily must face.

### A. The Problematic Rationale for Modern Policing

Advocates of modern, professionalized policing pitched their enterprise as one focused on crime prevention. The tools of this technologically sophisticated force—the radios, the patrol cars, the helicopters, the well-equipped crime labs—would combine to enable officers to easily capture and convict offenders. Such demonstrated success would convince would-be criminals to desist lest they ensure their own imprisonment (Walker 1977).

The effectiveness of modern police forces was clearly overdrawn; little evidence exists to substantiate its crime-fighting claims (Bayley 1994; Kelling 1983; Manning 1977).<sup>3</sup> Put simply, variations in policing have little impact on crime rates. Departments advertising themselves as primarily focused on reducing

<sup>3</sup> Sherman (1992) has attempted to make the case that police intervention can work to reduce crime. However, he is hard put to find examples of clear police successes or to find examples of strategies that would work in numerous locations.



levels of criminal activity thus place themselves in a tenuous political position, because they cannot ultimately deliver the goods (Manning 1977).

The irony is not lost on some police officers, who from their daily practice become aware that their crime-fighting efforts are mostly ineffectual. Many wish to place regular surveillance on "problem areas" to "put the heat" on those who are engaged in, say, open drug sales. But such strict surveillance cannot be maintained forever, and thus the sales are difficult to snuff out fully. Further, many recognize that success in one area may only mean that the perpetrators will move to another area and become the problem of some other officer. And police officers can, of course, do little to address problems of poverty, poor education, and community disenfranchisement.

Police officers are thus put in a difficult position: They are given a task they cannot accomplish. Widely publicized as engaged in an important effort to rid society of the plague of crime and equipped handsomely to succeed in that mission, they are ultimately ineffectual, due to factors completely beyond their control. This startling contradiction between public image and actual practice can, however, be skirted with regular recourse to the discourse of an ardent morality. When "victories" do occur, when "predators" are in fact captured, officers perhaps overstate their significance with well-worn moralistic messages to help stave off a sense of incompetence that would accompany any more rational evaluation of their overall effectiveness. Caught between their image as crime fighters and the structural impediments to success, officers attempt to resurrect the nobility of their efforts by exaggerating the significance of their occasional triumphs. Their moralistic proclamations of good trumping evil provide a comforting refuge from the overall impotence of their crime-reduction capacities and allow them to ignore the vast chasm that divides their oft-stated goals and their actual success. Of course, the inability of the police to reduce crime rates to any significant extent does not necessarily lead to the construction of sharply defined categories of good and evil. However, understanding policing as ultimately concerned with the preservation of such grand values as liberty and peace through engaging the "enemy" who would destroy those values does have the effect of minimizing any sense of impotence that might result from a more sober assessment of the police's crime-fighting work.

### **B. Running Roughshod over Ambiguity**

Police officers are regularly asked to resolve social situations that are chaotic and confused. They find themselves in the middle of disputes between spouses and partners, landlords and tenants, proprietors and customers, and countless others, and are

subjected to loud and complicated claims and counterclaims. Faced with such situations, officers must not only attempt to untangle the web the disputants discursively create, but also must act quickly, decisively, and, it is hoped, fairly. In most cases, officers have other calls pending and cannot afford to burrow deep to the wellsprings of the dispute, even if they were inclined or skilled enough to do so. If complainants' stories differ, as they often do, then officers must make instant decisions about whose character is more worthy of respect, and thus which version to treat most seriously. As Bittner (1990:11) succinctly puts it: "The mission of the police is limited to imposing provisional solutions to uncontexted emergencies."

*The sergeant accepts a call that is billed as a domestic dispute. Normally, he would not take such a call because he rides alone; domestic disputes are understood by officers to be often volatile and thus more than a single officer can handle. However, his reading of the information given him by the dispatcher is that this is actually a landlord-tenant dispute. This turns out to be not exactly accurate, although the key issue is indeed real estate.*

*When he arrives, one woman emerges from the house in question and another from a car parked across the street. An elderly man remains seated in the parked car. A shouted exchange erupts between the women, during which they promise to alter each other's physical appearance. The sergeant impels the second woman to return to her car while he gets one side of the story.*

*The current dispute began when a friend of the man seated in the car attempted to enter the guest quarters behind the house in question, apparently to retrieve some of the man's belongings. It turns out that the elderly man used to own the house but deeded it over to the woman who now resides there; she, in fact, is his niece. The niece claims that her uncle had remarried a few years ago and deeded the house to her so that his new wife would not simply divorce him and take over the house. The divorce did ultimately occur, and the woman seated in the car is a new romantic interest.*

*The niece presents paperwork that appears to prove her rightful ownership of the property. The sergeant briefly inspects the documents and finds them legitimate, although he notes the presence of some white-out on one line. Still, he basically upholds the niece's position.*

*The couple in the car have emerged by this point, and the man is muttering constantly if incomprehensibly, betraying a seeming senility. The sergeant encourages him to spend some time to retrieve his property from the premises and counsels him to challenge the niece in a more formal legal process if he feels his claim is warranted. The sergeant remains at the house during the 15 minutes the man uses to retrieve some clothing to ensure that*

*the dispute does not become inflamed, but leaves when the man completes the retrieval.*

In a remarkably short time, the sergeant must attempt to calm the situation, gain an understanding of its significant dynamics, and make a decision. This dispute is entangled in a confusing family history made more complicated by the questionable documents and the elderly man's incoherence. And the stakes—ownership of a valuable piece of property—are quite high.

But the sergeant must act, and does so to the best of his ability. The niece appears to have the more legitimate stake, but the sergeant is doubtful enough to counsel the old man strongly to take the case to a higher authority. He then grants the man the right to accomplish his short-term goal of retrieving his goods, and ensures that this can occur peaceably.

*The sergeant is called to the parking lot of a mini-mall by a patrol officer team. They are handling a complaint by a woman who maintains she was harassed on the basis of sexual orientation. Another patron in the mall was angered when he thought she cut him off in the tight maneuvering for parking spaces. In his tirade against her that followed, he referred to her as a "fat dyke bitch." The woman now is displaying a pamphlet from a local gay and lesbian resource center that discusses legal proscriptions against such harassment, and insisting that the officers arrest the man. They are reluctant to do so, and seek the sergeant's imprimatur for their decision.*

*The sergeant agrees with the officers, and explains to the woman that the man did not know her and thus did not know anything definitive about her sexual orientation. Further, he notes that the dispute was really about a parking space, not sexual orientation. This contrasts, he maintains, to the sort of acts the law was intended to address: groups willfully and consciously seeking homosexuals for overt harassment.*

*However, the officers do address her feelings by summoning the man from inside the mall, explaining the situation to him, and persuading him to apologize. After he does so, the officers leave the scene.*

In the span of only 10 minutes, the officers define the situation, establish a course of action, and attempt to justify that action to the people involved. This process involves quickly deciding for themselves the most important issues at stake, the best interpretation of those issues in terms of the law, and the best means to bring some resolution. This is obviously a situation open to varying interpretations, and their chosen course of action may betray an absence of sympathy for victims of harassment based on sexual orientation. Either way, however, the process is a decidedly speedy one in which a delicate situation is resolved

hastily and with minimal attention to the entire range of issues at stake.

Regardless of the logic employed by the officers here, both situations illustrate the type of inchoate and complex situations they regularly face. Disputes are rarely simple, and evolve from a host of circumstances that officers cannot fully decode. Further, these disputes can be inflamed by such larger dynamics as homophobia, racism, or long-standing familial tensions. The situations officers face, in short, are inherently and irrevocably ambiguous.

But officers must ignore much of this ambiguity if they are to be effective in restoring order and if they are to keep up with their call load. Effectiveness often rests on decisiveness, so officers cannot hem and haw their way to a half-hearted decision. And their increasing queue of yet-unanswered calls places urgency on handling the dispute in the most parsimonious way possible.

The ambiguity inherent in the vast majority of police calls contrasts sharply with the clear-cut boundaries of good and evil that officers regularly construct in their moralistic discourse. Indeed, the contrast is probably not accidental. The overarching, trans-situational morality that officers construct seems a perfect antidote to any qualms that might arise from them running roughshod over the ambiguity in the disputes or other calls officers handle. Cast in terms of the broad and potent categories of good and evil, officers' actions take on a markedly less ambiguous character and provide a powerful justification for acts that may ultimately be open to question.

### **C. The Inevitable Harms of Policing**

Regardless of the aims of police actions, many resolutions that officers accomplish come at the expense of one of the parties involved. Of course, many cases the police handle, particularly the more mundane order-maintenance tasks that occupy much of their attention, do not have a clear opposition of interests and/or a high level of tension. However, officers regularly encounter situations that are confused and highly charged. This is most likely when those involved tell diametrically opposed versions of events and desired outcomes. In some cases, officers do attempt to reach a resolution that can receive some minimal degree of communal consent, but time pressures often dictate a more brusque response. In many cases, of course, there is a clear victim and perpetrator, so swift restraint of the latter is not fundamentally in question; the harm caused by jailing is not something that would trouble officers. But given the ambiguity discussed above, actions that clearly favor one party over another are not always easy to justify.

The potential unease that might accompany acting against one party's interest is compounded for officers by the coercive means to which they often resort to eventuate their desired outcome. Resistance to police commands is inevitable, and officers possess a wide array of tactics and tools to ensure their ultimate authority. It is this coercive authority that distinguishes the police from other social agencies (Bittner 1970) and explains their importance in upholding the state's legal and moral rule. But coercive force is obviously harmful to the individual involved, and its use makes clear the extent to which the police can deleteriously affect members of the citizenry.

It is therefore not surprising that officers spend much time discussing whether and how to use force. During the fieldwork, I observed a number of roll-call discussions that focused on recent shootings within the department. Lieutenants and sergeants reviewed each situation, explaining how the officers acted and how those actions were or were not justified. This training is motivated both to ensure that officers prevail in any confrontations with armed and dangerous suspects and to prevent any unnecessary use of force. Supervisors would continually remind officers that in any postincident investigation, "every shot must be accounted for." In other words, officers would be expected to justify each shot they fired as a responsible and reasonable use of force that did not unnecessarily endanger the wrong people.

In many cases, however, the use of force is not seen in such wary terms but is a badge of distinction that officers wear proudly. Officers are referred to as "ghetto gunfighters" who have fallen victim to the "John Wayne Syndrome." For these hard-charging officers, occasional uses of force are necessary to fight evil and earn internal distinction. The majority of officers, however, do not fall into this category; indeed, many officers try to avoid working with their more aggressive counterparts because they fear the potential damage to their career that an out-of-control partner might cause.

Still, the enforcement of police authority often involves making some persons suffer by denying them pursuit of their preferred path of action and/or physically restraining them. This compounds the unease stemming from the ambiguity inherent in most situations officers encounter; not only must officers act decisively in confused situations, but they must also often act against one party's interest, sometimes with recourse to coercive and ultimately lethal force. Further, because police officers serve as a key mechanism of the state's coercive apparatus, they attract potentially lethal attention themselves from those who resist police authority. Officers are never unaware of the potential danger they face at a moment's notice. Given this unavoidable mandate—to ensure order via coercive force in often-inchoate settings at the risk of their own lives—it is perhaps understandable

why officers take refuge in a moralistic discursive universe that avoids the irresolvable questions of whether this or that use of force is justified, and instead posit a more simplistic good/evil frame by which actions can be interpreted. This moralistic universe also defines a life lost in the line of duty as not a mere death but as a sacrifice for a large and worthy cause. An ardent morality provides officers a cushioned escape from the conundrums their social role foists on them, a retreat where they can wash away the difficult particularities of actual situations and thus helps them adapt to the reality of the potentially lethal risks they daily assume.

### III. The Implications and Paradoxes of Police Morality

Given the facts that police officers must quickly and coercively create order in ambiguous situations and that they are presumed to prevent crime when they cannot actually do so, it is easier to understand why simplistic moral frames might work to reduce their level of tension, why such moral frames might serve as an adaptive response to the inescapable and interminable anxieties of daily police practice. The difficult and easily questioned decisions they must constantly make are rendered less troublesome if they are nested in a broader and simpler discourse that bluntly describes behavior as either good or evil. The societal role of the police to create order coercively perhaps explains why their morality should be so singularly pronounced; the burden of their unique responsibility is alleviated by continually reinforcing the overall worth of their mission.

Police morality often yields laudable efforts. One can easily sympathize with an old woman who fears leaving her home and thus can endorse strong efforts on an officer's part to reduce her anxiety. In many cases, officers identify those who are most vulnerable—typically the elderly and children—and operate primarily to ensure their welfare. Given a strong desire to do good, many officers involve themselves deeply in their communities or work long hours. Indeed, many LAPD officers understood the recent inability of the officers' union to gain wide support for a "sickout" as a function of the inextinguishable desire of officers to serve; they simply could not condone leaving the citizenry unprotected. Similarly, officers worked many extra hours after the Northridge earthquake with little complaint.

But the dangers of excessive moralizing are equally clear. It is understandable why officers might regularly vilify those they define as their opponents. If the "bad guys" are defined as essentially evil, then officers' responses are more easily justified. Even if, say, the use of force was bit excessive, it was the perpetrator who initiated the encounter and who sought to harm the community. And whatever the officer did, he/she was ultimately mo-



tivated by the praiseworthy virtue of protecting the good from the depredations of evil. As Van Maanen (1978:234) put it, "In essence, the existence of an asshole demonstrates and confirms the police view of the importance and worth of themselves both as individuals and as members of a necessary occupation."<sup>4</sup>

The denial of ambiguity that excessive moralizing encourages is precisely the concern one must raise about it. Over time, officers' ability to discriminate between those who represent actual threats to public safety and those who do not may weaken, and thus all who reside in a given neighborhood may be too easily painted alike as evil. Given this understanding of people in these areas, officers may react brusquely and aggressively in situations where they do not face a clear danger. This will, of course, reverberate within the communities concerned, and tensions will develop. Relationships between the LAPD and the minority communities most liable to be labeled as incubators of evil have historically been tremendously strained (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, California Advisory Committee 1963; Cray 1972; Raine 1967). As abhorrent as the tapes of Mark Fuhrman were on their own terms, the extent of their impact was a function of this historical mistrust. Indeed, it is easy to speculate that the ability of defense lawyers in the O. J. Simpson case to convince a largely black jury to cast doubt on the practices of the LAPD succeeded largely because of this historical backdrop.

It is misguided to lay the blame for police-minority tension in Los Angeles or other cities solely at the feet of police moralizing (see Skolnick & Fyfe 1993). However, it is clear that the crude frames of good and evil, no matter how comforting, encourage an erosion of officers' ability to discriminate with more sensitivity between residents in minority neighborhoods. Not all who dress, walk, and talk in an apparently threatening way are in fact a danger, but many moralistic officers are unable to appreciate that fact. Thus, they approach those they label as bad in a harsh and imperturbable fashion and needlessly antagonize many who merit a lighter hand.

The problem, of course, is that, as I have argued, police morality is as potent as it is precisely because it helps mitigate the inescapable dilemmas of the job; it serves as an adaptation to the uncertainties and ambiguities that daily policing generates. However, it is not necessarily the only adaptation available to police officers. As Muir (1977) has argued persuasively, the hallmark of a truly professional police officer is the maturity that enables a broad perspective on human behavior, one that accepts ambiguity as an inherent component of human action and encounters.

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<sup>4</sup> The value of this discourse was made obvious during the trials of the officers involved in the beating of Rodney King. The defense's strategy was to portray King as the true danger to social order and to justify the officers' violent response as a reasonable defense of that order (Herbert 1995).

Police officers are perhaps unique in the extent to which they must regularly wrestle with the ambiguous nature of human reality. To the degree, however, that they use a structured morality to avoid the difficult task of discriminately interpreting social action, they are unable to police with the measured and delicate hand of a true professional. Officers pass the murkiness of the social world through the prism of their morality to reduce phenomena to a narrower spectrum of black-white/good-evil images. This is a comforting exercise but an ultimately troublesome one.

This discussion reveals the central paradox at the heart of police morality. In using their morality to render the social world in more sharply categorical terms, officers are led to enact or condone practices that are inconsistent with their virtuous self-definition. Their muscular morality enables them to justify various actions that are perpetually questionable and that almost unavoidably harm at least one citizen. They can therefore easily transform condemnable actions into condonable ones by excusing police excesses as first and foremost acts to uphold the good. It was Rodney King, after all, who terrorized a suburban Los Angeles community with his reckless driving, and it was those officers' duty to restrain him in whatever way they could. By couching their actions as tactics in the monumental battle to stave off evil, officers can lose the capacity to read nuance in the social landscape or even to cast a critical eye on their own behavior. Police actions that are, in fact, inconsistent with the moral cast that molds their self-interpretation can be reinterpreted as excusable given the larger fight for virtue that defines their mission.

An integral part of the tension within police morality is the seeming incompatibility of coercive force, which can maim and kill, and the pursuit of peace, order, and the good. The difficulty of balancing the harm of lethal force against the larger social aims for which it is ostensibly employed is perhaps the most basic dilemma facing police officers (Muir 1977). On the one hand, officers wish to portray themselves as saviors for the troubled and the vulnerable, the "thin blue line" that protects the orderly from the chaotic. On the other hand, the police exist primarily as a repository of legitimate coercive force, which they stand ready to employ on extremely short notice. The tension between these two is usefully illustrated in the following incident.

*A group of officers have followed a trail of clues from a shooting at a hamburger stand to a young woman's apartment. She is the girlfriend of the registered owner of a truck seen speeding from the scene. Because it is a fresh pursuit, the officers do not need a search warrant to enter the woman's house. She, however, is reluctant to open the door. The officers are polite and explain why they are there. They also attempt to compel her cooperation by discussing the general comfort the police bring her in times of*

*trouble. "We are the police," one officer reminds her, "the people you call when you need help and protection."*

*When this effort to create trust does not work, the officers inform her that the manager of the apartment building is on his way, and he will grant them legal access to her apartment. This is enough to convince her to open the door. Once inside, the officers search the apartment with aggressive thoroughness, overturning furniture and tossing items from closets. Two officers take the young woman into a back room where they press her for information about the suspect's whereabouts. One officer is overheard telling the woman that unless she tells them what they want to know, "We will thump you so hard it will hurt to sit down." The woman seems genuinely unable to provide them with any information, but she and the other three people in the apartment are taken to the station for further questioning.*

The officers' early invocation of the cherished protective role of police in society was obviously motivated by a desire to talk their way into the woman's apartment. Still, the contrast between their advertised ability to comfort and the actual threat they pose to the woman's property and physical well-being is stark. Regardless of how much they may try to convince the woman to see the police as the ultimate source of community protection, the officers quickly reveal the coercive heart of their occupation by trashing the apartment and threatening physical harm. The facade of benevolence crumbles in the earthquake of strong-armed policing.

On the other hand, as I have suggested, the benevolent aspects of policing are often genuine, real, and commendable. To the extent, however, that officers' good/evil categories are inflexible, they undercut the very morality they attempt to claim for themselves. The pervasiveness of police morality is undoubtedly related to the coercive tasks society relegates to them, enabling officers to assuage their sense of responsibility or guilt when they must harm another. But the soil of the police's moral high ground is ever unstable, precisely because of their coercive function. The fact that the police can cause harm to others gives rise to the comforting refuge of their morality, but their capacity to maim and kill also threatens to undercut that morality. An uneasy tension is thus built into the core of the police's moral vision, as they try to obscure what they cannot escape. Whether police officers can be successfully trained to adopt the more nuanced and mature perspective that Muir sometimes observed is an open question. The track record of contemporary policing, especially in Los Angeles, suggests that it is a challenge worth addressing.

#### IV. Conclusion

The importance of morality for justifying and promoting state rule is obvious and is the focus of much scholarly attention. The legal order, for example, is not just a dry-as-dust set of stodgy regulations but an attempt to structure virtue into the populace. The precise mechanisms through which this morality is inculcated into the citizenry are certainly worthy of our attention, because to study them is to reveal the actual work that states must accomplish to sustain themselves. One can thus avoid reifying the state as some sort of coherent, transcendent unity, and instead focus on the actual practices by which state rule is created and maintained (Abrams 1988).

It is therefore important to investigate how the state, through its legal order, aims its focus on its subject population and attempts to mold a model citizenry through its various proscriptions, how it seeks to make a moral order more pervasive and binding. But it is useful not only to focus on the state's external relations but also to investigate the *internal* processes through which state legal actors justify their actions, often with recourse to moralistic dictums. Police officers, for example, drink regularly from the fount of morality and replenish their internal esprit de corps by invoking a larger virtue that their actions serve. Given its prevalence and seeming power, this morality deserves explanation.

My suggestion is that this morality flows from three fundamental constituents of modern policing: the gap between the stated goals of the police and their inability to achieve them; the inherent ambiguity in most police-citizen encounters that officers must ignore to affect order quickly; and the inevitable harm that police actions, coercive or otherwise, cause some citizens. Police officers are thus placed in a difficult position. They are asked to arrest crime when they cannot, they are required to enforce order when denied the time and tools to unearth the full range of disordering influences, and they are compelled to use coercive force in quickly developing and uncertain circumstances. The combination of these factors can create potent dilemmas, whose intricacies can be simplified and disquiet can be eased through an equally potent morality. Cast in terms not of ambiguity and contradiction but rather in the rigid categories of good and evil, police actions are more easily justified, even if they overstretch certain bounds. Thus, a use of force that perhaps was not fully necessary given a complete understanding of the event in question is more easily condoned if understood as ultimately motivated by a desire to expunge evil from otherwise peaceable streets. Individual excesses are the price one pays in the ongoing effort to clean the city of the polluting stains of the irrational and chaotic.

On the one hand, police morality can be both understood and, at times, applauded; officers who work long hours and are genuinely motivated to improve people's quality of life deserve our fullest appreciation. And their willingness to insert themselves in dangerous situations where our fundamental physical well-being is at stake is extremely laudable. On the other hand, police morality, to the extent that it too crudely categorizes individuals and their actions, threatens to condone needlessly aggressive or insensitive treatment of some members of the citizenry. It undoubtedly has contributed to the sort of police-minority tensions that rage in Los Angeles and other cities. The drive to reduce ambiguity is perhaps necessary given the dilemmas officers face, but in erasing gray areas from their world-views, officers are led to enforce order in ways that are, paradoxically, inimicable to their moral definition of themselves. Thus, the morality of officers is born from unique aspects of the police's role in society but also can exacerbate the intensity of the moral dilemmas they regularly confront.

Any efforts to reform the police must be attentive to their morally created world-view and to the ways it shapes their everyday practice. The challenge is to ratify the officers' understandable need to imbue their work with a sense of overarching purpose while encouraging an openness to ambiguity that would discourage too-simplistic categorizations of people and events. In a sense, officers need to be encouraged not to allow their fervent morality to contribute to actions that are inconsistent with that morality. Police morality needs to be saved from itself in order to actually allow the work it ostensibly encourages.

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